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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a collaborative project in which K-3 Navajo students used oral history interviews, archival photos, and primary documents to explore the history of their communities. Participating students attended schools that were implementing the Dine (Navajo) Language and Culture teaching perspective, which is based on the premises that education is best when it reflects a sense of place, education should be based on the philosophy and values of those being educated, and teacher preparation should reflect the Dine perspective of education. Each school had a reciprocal relationship with the community. The community helped identify themes to be explored, and the students conducting field research. Students identified proficiency in the Navajo language as a resource in conducting this research. Many respondents answered students' questions in Navajo. Navajo language place names were an important link to the history of the community, names, and stories that had lost their connection to the past in translation. This research took students outside the classroom to hear stories in the Navajo language, thus helping students understand of the need to retell the stories to share the wealth of their community for future generations. (SM)

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Oral History Shares the Wealth of a Navajo Community

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Oral History Shares the Wealth of a Navajo Community

Sara L. Begay, Mary Jimmie, Louise Lockard

This paper describes a collaborative project where Navajo students in grades K-3 used oral history interviews, archival photos, and primary documents to explore the rich history of their communities. As they explored place names and questioned community members, students identified their Navajo language as an important resource in interpreting local historical events. The project was initiated by the students' teachers: Sara L. Begay at Leupp Schools Inc. and Mary Jimmie at Little Singer Community School in Bird Springs, whose schools are located in two communities on the Little Colorado River 45 miles northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation. Both schools are implementing the Diné [Navajo] Language and Culture teaching perspective, which is based on the premises that education is best when it reflects a sense of place, education should be based on the philosophy and values of those being educated, and the preparation of teachers should reflect the Diné perspective of education. At each school there is a reciprocal relationship between the school and community, involving the community in identifying themes to be explored and involving students in field research, and a series of relational learning opportunities has been developed in which the values of "place" and culture (see Deloria & Wildcat, 2001) are reinforced.

The students and Mr. Nelson Cody, the Navajo Culture Resource Teacher at Leupp Schools Inc., visited community sites, which he told the students stories about in Navajo. Then the students used interviews, archival and recent photos, and primary documents to document these sites and the changes that have occurred in them over time. The students identified proficiency in the Navajo language as a resource in conducting this research. Mr. Cody and the community members the students interviewed often spoke in Navajo in response to the students' question. The Navajo language place names were an important link to the history of the community, names, and stories that had lost their connection to the past in translation. The students wrote:

> The purpose of our research project was to document the oral history of the meaningful landmarks in the Leupp community. We collected this information to increase our historical knowledge and increase our sense of pride in the community where we live. It is one way of preserving our Navajo language and culture.

In response the question, "How did we gather information?" they wrote:

> We visited landmarks in the community with Mr. Cody. We read books and articles about the history of these places. We used the Internet to download images from the Northern Arizona University Cline Library Special Collections.

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From: J. Reyhner, O. Trujillo, R. L. Carrasco & L. Lockard (eds.). (2003). *Nurturing Native Languages* (pp. 149-154). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.

Students learned the history of their community through the medium of the stories told in the Navajo language. Third grader Le Ron Horseherder narrated the history of Black Rock that Steals Tseézhiin' ani iihí:

> The Navajo used to put their sheep in a big lava rock that was like the shape of a corral. The geological term for the black rock is basalt: lava that has cooled. Every time they put their flock in there, a sheep or goat would be gone in the morning. The Navajos would put 23 or 54 sheep or goats in there. When they got up the next morning there would be 22 or 53. One was always missing. The thing that made the sheep disappear was a bobcat that lived in the black rocks. At night it crawled out to get a sheep or goat to drag it to its cave that was right inside the corral. The Navajos did not know it was the bobcat that was eating their sheep. So they blamed it on the black rock and called it 'The Black Rock that Steals.'

The students used this dramatic story to help them understand a place in their community and to understand that their culture is constantly changing. They continued:

> Mr. Cody also told us that, a long time ago, the sheep corral was not built all the way around with a gate. They were built only halfway and the rest was left open. The Navajos did not use gates and the sheep never wandered off. Nowadays, when you don't put a gate on the corral or leave it open, the sheep will run away. If the sheep wander off, you have to look for them and you can't come home until you find them.

Navajo stories span a historical period from the arrival of Navajos in the Little Colorado River basin, to the arrival of Euro-Americans, to the present. An understanding of these roots is necessary in order to understand possibilities for the future of the community. It is the stories that these teachers and students are able to recover and pass on to their children that will survive. The students visited sites of initial contact with Euro-Americans. General Fremont's fort was built on the Little Colorado River as Navajos returned to their ancestral homeland from Ft. Sumner. The students wrote:

> In the Little Colorado River gorge between Grand Falls and Black Falls is an island on which a 'fort' was erected around 1868. Gun holes surrounded the thick 3-foot walls evenly spaced about 4 feet apart. General Freemont and his troops were stationed there to maintain peace and order among the Navajos after their release from captivity at Fort Sumner. If anyone has any additional information about this fort, please contact us.

Throughout the last hundred years, the Leupp community has changed not only in terms of social and economic institutions that have grown and flourished and then declined and vanished but also in terms of the natural environment, which has been affected by changing land use and climate. In *Community Culture and the Environment: A Guide to Understanding a Sense of Place,* the sense of place is an important component of environmental education which "is most effective when it speaks to local issues, problems and priorities" (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2002, p. 16)

Lavelle Walker, a Third Grader, wrote:

> Many years ago a lot of cottonwood trees grew along the Little Colorado River valley. The trees were very tall. When it rained, the trees grew more. One day it stopped raining. Then the branches curled up because there was no more water. When the branches curled up, the Navajos called them 'T'iisnazbas' or 'Tree Round.' Local resident, Mr. Jackie Thompson said he used to see many cottonwood trees growing everywhere along the river, but there are only a few now. Mrs. Eunice Kelly, the Third Grade teacher at our school told us that the cottonwood trees were planted along the river to control flooding and erosion.

Donovan David, a student, continued:

> In 1984 there was a farm called the Beaver Farm. The cornfield was very big. We found a shed near the farm. Just outside the shed was a diesel tank that gave power to run the diesel engine that was inside the shed. The diesel engine pumped water through the big water pipes to the field to help the crops to grow. The people grew watermelons, cantaloupe, corn, and squash. The big farm was almost as big as the city of Leupp. The farm was named after a white man called Herman Wolf, the first trader on the Reservation. The Navajos used to call him 'Beaver Man' because he liked trapping beavers. But now there is no more corn because nobody plants anything there anymore. It is sad that a good thing like this farm has to end just because people do not think the same way about things.

Students visited the Tolchacho site north of Leupp and photographed the still standing adobe walls. They compared their photos with one of the first school in Tolchacho and wrote:

> Tolchacho was the first community established on the banks of the Little Colorado River. Mr. William Riley Johnston founded the community in 1900. Johnston, a Methodist Missionary from Kansas, lived with his family in a tent for two years until permanent building could be built. Tolchacho was the site of the first post office, church, trading post, and

> the first school in the region. Tolchacho burned in 1918 and the community was relocated in Old Leupp 10 miles south. Mrs. Pauline Riggs, an employee at Leupp, told us that her father attended the Tolchaco Mission School. John Walker, a graduate of the Hampton Institute in Virginia, became a trader at Tolchacho in 1906. In 1910 he moved across the river to Leupp where he established the Leupp Trading Post that he operated from 1910 to 1912.

Johnston opened a training school for Navajos (Johnston, 1936; Dolaghan & Scates, 1978). The Leupp Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Agency was established in 1910, and Leupp Boarding School was completed in 1912—named for Frances Leupp Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1905-1908. Leupp was the site of the first Navajo chapter (the Navajo unit of local government) and was the home of Philip Johnston who successfully proposed that the Navajo language be used to make an unbreakable code during World War II.

The students describe changes in the course of the Colorado river and in their community. In 1920 the BIA constructed a steel bridge across Canyon Diablo. Students wrote:

> In 1920 H.W. Smith and the Babbitt Brothers Trading Company established the Sunrise Trading Post at the north end of the steel truss bridge. The bridge crossed the north end of Canyon Diablo where it met the Little Colorado River.

The location of this new trading post influenced yet another change. In the 1920s the Leupp community provided health care at the Leupp hospital and K-12 education, including sports. The Agency had a central heating plant and a coal-burning generator. Cottonwood and tamarisk were planted throughout the town to prevent erosion. Students wrote: "There was a devastating flood in 1927. Mr. Cody shared a story about a wagon that was carried downstream for four miles. When the wagon was swept ashore, someone looked inside and found a kitten."

Eight foot dikes were built to protect the town from future flooding. However, despite the efforts to control the river through planting and the construction of the dikes, in 1938 a catastrophic flood weakened the school building, and the school was closed. Students were transferred to boarding schools in Tuba City or Keams Canyon. In 1941 empty agency buildings were selected as the site of a penal colony for Japanese-American World War II internees identified as troublemakers.

Just as the changing banks of the river defined the changing institutions of the Leupp community for over 100 years, efforts to retell its rich history often focused on uncertainty in the face of change. Students photographed two rock houses that were built in the early 1900s. The houses were built as police substations. The students wrote:

> Mrs. Elva Nez of Birdsprings told the students how her father Earl Johnson and a friend Casey Curley ran away from the boarding school and were apprehended by the police and locked in the police station. The boys removed a sandstone block and escaped through the hole in the wall of the police station. Pursued by the policemen, Earl tried to hide by covering himself with dirt in a ditch. Earl and Casey were apprehended and returned to the boarding school.

In the 1950s buildings that had housed the school and hospital, and then the penal colony, were razed. In the 1960s the BIA school was rebuilt on the west bank of the Little Colorado River in the community of "New Leupp" or "Sunrise." Leupp BIA School gained local autonomy as Leupp Schools Inc. in 1974 and it continues to operate as a boarding and day school today. The students wrote:

> Talk about a long trek to finally arrive where the school is at today! The present-day school buildings were completed in 1960. At that time, Leupp Boarding School was one of the largest schools on the Navajo Reservation because it was open to any Navajo students from across the Navajo land. The school continues to serve the students of Canon Diablo, Tolani Lake, Bird Springs, Grand Falls and Black Falls. The school serves over 200 students in grades K-12. One of the school's strengths is its initiative to retain Navajo Culture and Language as reflected in the school's mission statement and philosophy. The school's mission statement is 'Building the future, keeping the past.'

Students climb to look through gun holes at General Fremont's station and continue to question community members about these places and the historical events that surround them. In their investigation of the past students found much to understand the future of their community. Their research took them outside the classroom to listen to stories in the Navajo language and gain an understanding of the need to retell these stories to share the wealth of their community for future generations. Knowledge learned in one language paves the way for knowledge acquisition in a second language (Cummins, 2001). The curricula at Leupp and Little Singer are contextualized with the knowledge, skills, and experiences the students bring to class, and these Navajo language oral history projects provide students with experiential learning in which the values of "place" and culture are reinforced in a community setting.

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